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Frances Burney's *Evelina*: A Critique of the Ancien Regime and Plea for its Moral Reform

Abstract

This paper argues that Burney's 1778 novel does not encourage female empowerment through individualism but, instead, urges moral reform, by which to resist individualism and encourage integrity, or virtue.

Keywords

Frances Burney, *Evelina*, individualism, England, moral reform

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Comments

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Frances Burney's *Evelina*: A Critique of the *Ancien Regime* and Plea for its Moral Reform

When a young woman of gentry birth and education entered the 18th-century social world of London, she faced an onslaught of suitors, both upper and lower gentry, at every gathering. How was she to decipher, through their courtly manners and language, the sincere from the predatory? In *Evelina: Or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance Into the World*, Burney uses Evelina's correspondence with her guardian to examine not only a young lady's social education but also the *ancien regime* of pre-Reform England in the approaching tide of Lockean individualism. Evelina's correspondence with Rev. Mr. Villars gives the prerequisites for a marriage of moral/spiritual equality—prerequisites of education and morality guided by faith.

Evelina's social education—first among upper and lower gentry during the London “season,” then among commoners at High Holborn in summer, and finally among upper gentry of Bristol Hotwells and Clifton Hill in autumn—forms her perceptions of the different societal groups. She and the reader learn that those social groups are also evaluating her, according to her apparent status. Since Evelina must base her perceptions of gentry and commoner on their responses to her perceived social standing, she learns to decipher the sincere from the fraudulent, allowing Burney to imply the threat of individualism to women's well-being and the need to resist that threat if the integrity of language and marriage are to remain. Such resistance could come about only through belief in the “Redeemer,” who removes her fear of death and “God's wrath,” and through “Providence,” whom she credits for releasing her from the court, as she explains in her diaries (Woolsey 146-7; 182). Through Evelina's ordeal, Burney validates the one-class society, but only with moral reform, based on her faith in the Redeemer of Anglicanism and the Providence of Calvinism.

Accounts of Burney's England give conflicting views of the eighteenth century: one is the view that pre-Reform England remained a stable regime until the 1832 Reform Bill; the second is the view that 18th-century England, as a whole, was evolving toward modernity. The first view is argued by J.C.D. Clark, in *English Society 1688-1832*. He writes, the "old society" of the "gentlemen, Church of England, and crown" maintained its "intellectual and social hegemony" from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 until the Reform Movement of 1828-1832, when it attempted to appease radicals and dissenters and forestall their encroachment (4). According to this view, English society did not divide itself into classes until 19th-century reform changed the make-up of parliament. Instead, writes Asa Briggs, in "The Language of Class in Early Nineteenth-Century England," members of society continued to see themselves as part of a hierarchy, "from the elite to the common people" (4), in which a "chain of connection" implied place and social obligation; a "bond of attachment" implied duty...[and] deference (5).

Like Clark and Briggs, Peter Laslett describes 18th-century England as a "one-class society" since it included "a large number of status groups but only one body of persons capable of concerted action over the whole area of society, only one class in fact" (197). This powerful body, or class, consisting of upper and lower gentry, were bound by obligation to the commoners, who were bound by duty and deference to them. What *Evelina* and we discover is the violation of this "chain of connection" and "bond of attachment," by gentry and commoner alike, a violation that suggests the need of moral reform among the gentry, who are responsible for guiding the commoners, who imitate them.

The second view, held by social historian Roy Porter, assumes that "the Georgian century teetered on 'modernity'" in its growing pursuit of "liberty and individualism" (4). While Porter agrees with Clark that "the 'old order'...had not significantly been undermined by 1800" (vii), he argues that its "blind traditionalism" was being increasingly attacked by "[l]iberals, from philosophers such as Locke to popularizers like Addison..." (256). Replacing the "earlier Calvinist theology of original sin and depravity," according to Porter, the "intelligentsia's liberal and optimistic religion affirmed free-will, salvation for all, the goodness of mankind and its capacity for progress" (256). Because they believed that individuals "had the right to moral autonomy and self-realization" (256), they didn't treat "egoism, and

even greed...as sinful and anti-social, but as natural” (258). This is certainly the position of Sir Clement Willoughby, in his wreckless pursuit of Evelina for ends that don’t include marriage (Burney 380). The same view had prompted Sir John Belmont to pursue Evelina’s mother, Caroline Evelyn, for her beauty and fortune, then to deny the marriage, relegating her to a pregnant outcast until Rev. Villars gave her asylum before her untimely death in birthing Evelina.

According to Clark, however, characterizing 18th-century England with “[bourgeois] individualism” ignores the “religious dimensions in which all moved” (47), dimensions defined by the hierarchical creation order, “premised on Pauline Trinitarian theology” (58). This general belief, according to Clark, countered the natural-right theory of Locke, since Locke was considered an “advocate of theological heterodoxy,” even if “not yet...democracy” (48). According to D. D. Devlin’s *The Novels and Journals of Fanny Burney*, Burney too supported the one-class society, as her diaries and letters contain “little political comment ” (2), other than her admiration of emigrant French Constitutionals for their “loyalty to [their]king” and endurance of dangers (6). She also resisted a marriage of material security and later married the “Roman Catholic, impoverished Constitutionalist d’Arblay” for his “simple ‘openness’” (6) and his grief over the king’s execution. Burney’s political conservatism stemmed from her early associations with Samuel Johnson (her literary tutor and mentor) as well as Edmund Burke and Horace Walpole, etc. (2). After her marriage to d’Arblay, the *Critical Review* called her political views “‘too aristocratic’” (9).

Even though Burney’s letters express “aristocratic” political views not promoting women’s autonomy, Kristina Straub detects several paradoxes in Burney’s *Evelina*. According to Straub’s article “Evelina: Marriage as the Dangerous Die,” one such paradox is the “contradictory ideological value” of marriage for mid-18th-century women—one that seems to promise security and happiness (418) but offers instead a “static” life devoid of development and happiness (419). For Evelina’s mother, it meant “powerlessness,” “loss of integrity...,even personal destruction” (413). The only alternative offered, explains Straub, is spinsterhood, which steals a woman’s “self-respect” (424).

The other paradox, writes Straub, in “The Young Lady Makes Her Entrance,” is the set of prerequisites—virtue, innocence, beauty—needed to attract a gentleman, as these are the very qualities that lead to a young lady’s undoing: “the exclusively domestic upbringing that gives the young lady value in the form of innocence” also fails to “prepare her for the experiences of public life” (20). Straub concludes, in *Divided Fictions: Fanny Burney and Feminine Strategies*, that while the “socially acceptable modes of feminine behavior promise the heroine security” and “value through romantically conceived marriage,” they “simultaneously [limit] the extent of her social and economic power” (19). Still, in *Divided Fictions*, Straub asserts that Burney’s “doubleness” is not a “deliberate attempt to subvert,” or encourage female self-empowerment, but is Burney’s “[honest] response to ideological conflicts in the culture and a strategy for female psychic survival” (3).

Certainly Burney’s novel depicts the beginning of ideological warfare in England, between the still male-dominated, Christianly-oriented, one-class society and the spirit of individualism; between “female powerlessness” and the desire to “assert self-worth” (3, 4); between the romantic ideal of marriage and its unromantic reality. However, Burney doesn’t play out this warfare in Evelina herself or use Evelina’s actions as an example strategy for female psychic survival. Evelina is simply navigating her way through social language to distinguish truth from falsehood, uncovering for readers the dangers of self-seeking individualism. Through this ordeal, Evelina learns, and Burney suggests, that in order to survive, gentry women and society itself must be guided by true, or virtuous, gentlemen—in birth, manners, and integrity—as “Providence” (Burney 436) designed it. For if Burney believed in Calvinist theology, as her letters attest, she believed that only a Christian, or virtuous, gentle man/woman respects another’s intrinsic worth as divine image-bearer and thus adheres to obligation and duty over desire, based on accountability to the Redeemer. Only a Christian, or virtuous gentle uses language and manners disinterestedly, to promote spiritual (intellectual, moral) welfare in society.

Because Rev. Villars’ disinterested guidance was ignored by the infatuated Mr. Evelyn, two generations have ended tragically, and all the elements are in place for a third tragedy as Evelina enters the same “world.” Mr. Evelyn’s unwise marriage to an attractive but greedy French tavern maid (the

eventual Madame Duval), resulting in Caroline Evelyn's birth, took Mr. Evelyn's life early; then, Caroline's avoidance of a mercenary marriage to a commoner, arranged by her mother, ended in betrayal and abandonment by financially disappointed Lord Belmont, but not before Evelina was conceived and disowned by her father. Now that Rev. Villars has lovingly shaped Evelina through the same education as that of her mother and grandfather, he and readers fear a third tragedy, especially as Villars feels compelled, by duty, to allow Lady Howard to introduce Evelina to London society as the first step toward a gentry marriage. But as with his previous wards, he lovingly guides, this time with letters, until his role is assumed by the only other moral gentleman, Lord Orville, who will be motivated initially only by "an unaffected interest in [Evelina's] welfare" (Burney 378).

This interest should characterize all members of society, but Burney shows its tenuous hold on both commoner and gentry. The aggressively entrepreneurial Branghtons and Madame Duval defer to the gentry—as when the ostentatiously fashionable Mr. Smith "shrink[s] into nothing" in the presence of Sir Clement (Burney 243), and the Miss Branghtons try to impress "Miss" with their clothes and knowledge of London life. Still, no sense of duty prevents Madame Duval from trying to force another ruinous, financially motivated marriage, this time between her granddaughter Evelina and her commoner nephew; nor does it prevent Tom Branghton from using Evelina's name to usurp Lord Orville's coach and enter his house, nor Sir Clement and Lord Merton from objectifying and pursuing Evelina.

These depictions, which clearly warn against encroaching individualism, not only to gentry men and women but to society as a whole, are misinterpreted, by Straub, as Burney's recipe for a woman's psychic survival between conflicting ideologies. If Burney's *Evelina* were written as such a strategy in a male-controlled world, the words of protagonists Evelina and Lord Orville would carry more satirical intent, like those of Austin's Elizabeth Bennett. Instead, we read of Evelina's anguish in disappointing Lord Orville by her social ignorance, and Lord Orville's anguish in misconstruing her ignorance. That these events don't prevent their further interest in each other doesn't suggest a strategy for winning suitors; they do suggest that sincerity can lead to trust and respect. Also, even without the motive of self-empowerment, Evelina retains her sense of self-worth, winning the reverence of Mr. McCarthy, the

respect and affection of M. Du Bois, and the frustrated love of Sir Clement. She eventually gains her rightful fortune, from both Madame Duval and Sir John Belmont, by not pursuing it through strategy, and she secures Lord Orville's devotion and proposal, even without status, fortune, or conniving.

In other words, reading an implied satirical contradiction in *Evelina* (i.e., in Burney)—between Evelina's ostensible integrity and her strategy for securing Lord Orville—ignores the evidence of historiographers, Evelina's letters, and Burney's correspondence. According to Clark, echoed by opponent Porter, the “champions of patriarchalism” vastly outnumbered those of “individualism” and “persisted long into the eighteenth century...” (77). If anything, Burney warns of the latter as a reason to preserve gentry integrity and authority, but she promotes their reform to a higher moral/spiritual standard.

Burney's advocacy for moral reform develops through Evelina's three-part journey, her “entrance” into a leisure world of men, entertainment, and trade from the secluded domestic world of guarded innocence (Straub, “Introduction: Cultural and Historical Background” 11-24). Straub calls this journey a variation of the Cinderella narrative in, which the terms “young lady” and “entrance...take their meanings ...from their usage” in the then contemporary narratives of “female innocence and the inevitability of marriage” (19). More significant than these narrative usages is the biblical directive to raise a child the way she should go so that she doesn't depart from it when she is older (Proverbs 22.6), when she enters what Augustine calls the “Worldly” city, a self-centered, not a God-centered world (Book 14, Ch. 28). On this journey, Evelina learns the gentry's proprieties as well as the distinctions between gentry and commoner and between moral and immoral gentry. In so doing, she validates, the “old society,” in which true gentles were to rule, by providential design, for society's good.

Prerequisite to the journey, Burney supports social responsibility. For instance, Rev. Villars defers to Lady Howard's request to send Evelina to London with Mrs. Mirvan. For though he fears Madame Duval's treachery if she encounters Evelina, and worries about Evelina's future discontent in a lower station, he yields to Lady Howard and even allows Evelina to visit her treacherous grandmother, advising Evelina to show “the respect and deference due to” her grandmother without imitating her misconduct (100). This visit to Howard Grove and London acknowledges a necessary preparation for

gentry membership, to which (Burney suggests) she belongs by inheritance and integrity: an inherited “excellent understanding,” and integrity in the “desire of obliging,” cultivated by Villars’ moral education. These qualities will help Evelina make necessary distinctions among the gentry.

As she appraises them—recognizing Mr. Lovel as a ridiculous fop, Lord Merton as an immoral reprobate, Sir Clement as a deceitful predator, and only Lord Orville as a true gentleman—they appraise her, on the basis of apparent status and manners. When Evelina violates rules of etiquette at her first private ball, she notices how Mr. Lovel vindictively accuses her [the “*rustick*”] of “ill manners” while Lord Orville inspires her confidence with “sensible and spirited” conversation and “gentle...engaging” manners (76), then protects this “weak creature” from Lord Merton’s curiosity (81). In her second blunder, when she uses Lord Orville’s name to protect herself from Sir Clement at a public ball, she distinguishes Lord Orville’s sensibility from Sir Clement’s insensitive boldness, a distinction between obligation and self-interest. When Evelina must explain her behavior, Lord Orville understands her dilemma, insists she has honored his name, and leads her “tormentor away” (93). While Sir Clement constructs her as an ingénue to be toyed with, Lord Orville sees her as a moral/spiritual equal.

At places of public amusement, including Ranelagh, the Pantheon, and the opera, Evelina contrasts Lord Orville’s civilizing influence to the confusion and pain inflicted merrily by Captain Mirvan, Sir Clement, and Lord Merton, all warnings of encroaching individualism. Captain Mirvan verbally and physically attacks Madame Duval for vindictive amusement, Sir Clement encourages the Captain’s schemes for his own advantage, but Lord Orville evokes “restraint” (104). And at the opera, when Evelina escapes from Madame Duval and the Branghtons, Sir Clement takes advantage of her altered status by forcing her into his carriage, where he terrifies her with improper behavior. By contrast, Lord Orville hastens to Queen-Anne Street to confirm her safe arrival (108).

Though approving of her judgments, Rev. Villars advises that she maintain strict social boundaries and duties. He recognizes Sir Clement’s “artfulness” and Lord Orville’s nobility; still, he never suggests Lord Orville as a suitor for the impoverished Evelina (162). Even so, he allows Lady Howard to claim Evelina’s patrimony from Sir John Belmont and forbids the conniving grandmother,

Madame Duval, from taking Evelina to France. All of Rev. Villars' efforts and fears for Evelina, Burney warns, are essential for her first phase of social education/testing.

In the second phase, among Madame Duval's shop-keeping relatives of High Holborn, Evelina finds their curiosity offensive, their conversations loud, ill-mannered, and shallow. In her reduced status, she quickly distinguishes moral from immoral gentry, according to the way they now construct and respond to her. She discovers that both gentry and commoner deconstruct her public persona, happily recognizing the disparity between her character and her circumstances. At Snow Hill, the Miss Branghtons' deference turns to sarcasm: they hadn't expected "Miss" in the summer, for it's not at all the *fashion*" (209); they also subject her to improper displays of affection with Mr.'s Smith and Brown (210). This behavior, and its accompanying moral atmosphere, compared to that of Queen Anne Street, seems a "desert" (213) that results in Evelina's psychical suffering. Such suffering only heightens her awareness of Mr. Macarthy, whom the Branghtons mock for his reduced circumstances, and compels her to assist him: she not only prevents his self-destruction but restores his hope through her unobtrusive charity.

By contrast, Madam Duval's and Sir Clement's concentrated attempts to seize Evelina for their own designs warn of individualism's destructive power unless restrained by a moral gentry. When Sir Clement intercepts Evelina's letter to Lord Orville and forges a reply, he temporarily destroys Evelina's physical, psychical, and spiritual health. The supposed degeneracy of even Lord Orville (his impropriety in soliciting her affection) corrodes Evelina's faith in the Anglican patriarchy, the created order, and her own perceptions: "I lament to find myself in a world so deceitful" that we "must suspect what we see, distrust what we hear, and doubt even what we feel!" (298).

Shocked at this discrepancy between appearance and character, writing and speaking (305), signifier and signified, Evelina and Rev. Villars each deconstruct and interpret the text of events. Rev. Villars believes that Orville's note, even if written under the influence of alcohol, reveals his true character; Evelina believes that Lord Orville's consistent moral behavior, in spite of his written note, reveals his true character. Villars privileges his writing; Evelina privileges his speech and behavior.

The third phase of Evelina's education, at Bristol Hot Wells and Clifton Hill, proves that Evelina's interpretation is correct: Lord Orville "is still himself! Still...all that is amiable in man!" (313), since in him, what appears to be—his speech and behavior--represents what is. With his assistance, faith in her innocence, and marriage proposal (let alone his innocence in the matter of the forged note), he restores her faith, completes her education, secures her legitimacy, rewards her innocence, and ends her internal conflict, one not shared by Burney herself. By contrast, Mrs. Beaumont treats Evelina with "mechanical" condescension; Lady Louisa ignores her as "no one"; and Mr. Lovel predictably constructs her as a "toadeater" until he learns of her true lineage. Only Lord Orville remains true gentleman in his "politeness" and "sweetness" (243); his self-deprecation over his suspicions of her; his efforts to bring about Mr. McCarthy and Evelina's reunion with each other and with their father; and his plan to mitigate the embarrassment of Sir John's assumed daughter, Miss Belmont, through the two marriages at once: her marriage to Mr. Macarthy and Evelina's to Lord Orville.

As to the motives of Lord Orville's gentility, certainly his "arbor" dialogue with Sir Clement, more than any other dialogue, serves as Burney's warning against a growing disregard of reason and morality. When Lord Orville asks Sir Clement his "intentions" with Evelina, their opposing ideologies determine their evaluations of her worth. Lord Orville declares his intention to protect her well-being as a friend; Sir Clement declares his intention to "persevere" with her, though not for marriage. Lord Orville verbally constructs Evelina as a woman of quality in her education and "natural love of virtue and... mind"; Sir Clement constructs Evelina as an autonomous, free agent and tells Orville to "let Miss Anville look to [or protect] herself" (377). Lord Orville implies a belief in moral absolutes, constructing Evelina as a person of intrinsic "worth" and "excellence" (377); Sir Clement implies a belief in self-interest, constructing Evelina as a person of extrinsic worth, "whose ...dowry is her beauty" (378 and the the object of his desire.

Subsequent to this reported conversation, Evelina becomes the object, not of Sir Clement's passion, as she might have been, unless protected by Lord Orville, but of Lord Orville's confession of selfless love that recognizes her equality: "I revere you! I esteem and I admire you above all human

beings! You are the friend to whom my soul is attached as to its better half!" (290). Even when she admits to being "a child of bounty,--an orphan from infancy," "disowned forever by [her]nearest relation" (304), he asks only to seek her guardian's consent immediately so that their "fates may be indissolubly united" and he can devote his life to alleviating the burden of her past and preventing her "future misfortunes!" (304-5). Good to his word, he intercedes for her with Lord Belmont, ending Evelina's alienation, Mr. Macarthy's misery, and Miss Belmont's false identity, but in way that brings unity and restoration.

When Evelina expresses her gratitude to Rev. Villars, for committing her in prayer to her "real parent [God]," divine Providence receives the credit for all that has transpired. Lord Orville has announced his "devotion" to Evelina (385) without knowing her lineage and has brought about reconciliation with her father and brother, as if to confirm Burney's Anglican belief in prayer's efficacy, her Calvinist belief in Providence, and Clark's idea of the "religious dimension in which all moved."

Lord Orville's recognition of her worth, as a human being and lover of virtue, suggests the possibility of moral equality in marriage, at least between the virtuous, or Christian, gentry. Those who believe in Providence and the Redeemer perceive not only others' worth and equality but the inability of courtly clichés to express love's depth. When he describes Evelina as his superior in worth, his soul's "better half," he states that she is "dearer...than language has the power of telling" (383). For both Lord Orville and Evelina, love transcends courtly language.

By contrast, Sir Clement betrays his self-interested pursuit of Evelina by contradicting his courtly language with uncourtly behavior. His hope, to win Evelina's physical submission by making her doubt Lord Orville's integrity redounds on itself, leaving him without dignity or the appearance of sense. His rudeness to Mrs. Beaumont and his earlier participation in Captain Mirvan's despicable pranks warn us of his contempt for every social group, including his own. Without Rev. Villars' counsel, Mrs. Selwyn's assistance, and Lord Orville's intervention, Sir Clement would have destroyed the future of Evelina, Mr. Macarthy, and Lord Belmont, whose redemption was yet incomplete.

As for Evelina, instead of resenting or dreading her hasty marriage to Lord Orville, she intends to "express better than by words" her "sense" of his "benevolence and greatness of mind" (422). She too

finds language insufficient to express her love and “contentment” (441). In response to the good tidings of Evelina’s engagement, Rev. Villars thanks “Providence” for giving Evelina “felicity” in marriage to equal her “worthiness” (442).

Moral leaders such as Lord Orville, suggests Burney, work to un-do the fall, or, as Abraham Kuyper would later explain, transform culture, bringing it to a “higher stage,” in “accordance with God’s ordinance” (73). In that transformed world, manners and language mean what they represent, marriages of equality are possible, innocence and integrity are rewarded; and virtue (moral goodness), not individualism, is the goal; otherwise, courtship and marriage are doomed to deception, betrayal, and disillusion.

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